sleeper

season two

ED BRUBAKER
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WILDSTORM UNIVERSE™

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Suggested
For Mature
Readers

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My old handler John Lynch used to say--

WHY TELL THE *TRUTH* WHEN A *LIE* WILL GET THE JOB DONE JUST AS WELL?

--which I thought was funny, when I was on the INSIDE of those lies.

But there was some part of me, even back then, that wondered how much he was lying to ME, too, and what ABOUT?

Now, out here on the far side of right and wrong, Lynch is trying to make contact with me again, trying to show me he's worth trusting enough to even talk to.

And all I can do is look for the lies...

...especially since I've been telling so many myself lately.

AH, AGENT CARVER...I WAS BEGINNING TO THINK YOU'D ***FORGOTTEN*** ME.

SOMEHOW I REALLY DOUBT THAT, TAO.

WHAT ELSE AM I SUPPOSED TO THINK WHEN YOU DROP OFF THE RADAR FOR OVER A ***WEEK?***

I TOLD YOU, WE GOT IN A ***MAJOR*** FIRE-FIGHT WITH THE CAIRO POLICE. I HAD TO ***LAY LOW*** FOR A WHILE.

CERTAINLY, HOLDEN, BUT WHY ARE YOU STILL EVEN ***IN*** CAIRO?

SURELY LYNCH CAN'T BE WAITING AROUND FOR YOU TO MAKE ***CONTACT*** AFTER ALL THIS TIME?

LYNCH WOULDN'T BE ***STUPID*** ENOUGH TO COME HIMSELF ANYWAY, WOULD HE?

HE'S GOT ME JUMPING THROUGH HOOPS, BUT SINCE ***YOU*** WANT ME TO HAVE THIS MEETING WITH HIM SO MUCH...WHAT ***CHOICE*** DO I HAVE?

The Manipulations

WHAT *HOOPS*, EXACTLY?

WELL, THAT FIRE-FIGHT WITH THE POLICE, FOR ONE.

NOW I'M WAITING FOR A SECOND CONTACT FROM HIS PEOPLE.

IF THAT GOES OKAY, THEN THERE SHOULD BE A *FACE-TO-FACE* ON THE HORIZON, AS ORDERED.

OH, COME *ON*, HOLDEN. YOU HAVE TO AT LEAST BE CURIOUS TO SEE WHAT THE OLD BASTARD HAS TO SAY FOR HIMSELF.

NOT REALLY. I'M MORE INTERESTED IN WHY LYNCH MEANS MORE TO YOU THAN ANY *OTHER* GOVERNMENT SPOOK.

WHATEVER GAVE YOU *THAT* IDEA?

I'M *HERE*, AREN'T I? MUST MEAN *SOMETHING* TO YOU.

CLEVER BOY... LISTEN, JUST FINISH UP AND GET BACK TO HOME BASE. MISS MISERY'S BEEN GETTING *RESTLESS* WITHOUT YOU AROUND.

SHE'S MAIMED SOME VALUABLE PEOPLE.

I'LL BET SHE HAS.

OH, AND HOLDEN...IF YOU'RE KEEPING A *LOW PROFILE*, HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO GET BEATEN EARLIER TONIGHT? JUDGING BY YOUR *FACE*.

OH, *THIS?* LET'S JUST SAY, IT WAS A PRETTY *DIVEY* BAR AND MY ARABIC IS REAL *RUSTY*...

Or let's just say I'm here on my OWN business right now, is more like it.

Business I'd rather Tao NOT know about until it's too late for him to try and stop me.

Unfortunately, last week's little problem with the police put a crimp in my schedule...

...because the woman I came here to KILL decided to change hotels after there was a deadly shoot-out in front of hers.

Just my luck, though-- I was able to get her unlisted forwarding address from the concierge.

But the new hotel is a tougher nut to crack. More onsite security, fewer surrounding buildings.

Makes planning my assault a bit tougher.

But what do you expect when you're trying to kill one of the most powerful people in the world?

There's always going to be heavy security around them.

Tao's usual plan would be to buy off someone on the inside. Make a deal to get a safe way in and out.

But I didn't have his insight into the human mind or the ABILITIES that went with it.

So I spend a week getting the lay of the land. Following Diamanda M'Batu and her security detail around Cairo.

Looking for an opening. For anything that will make this job easier.

And the whole time, hearing Lynch's messages echoing in my head.

Messages I got from other people, but that I still hear in HIS voice anyway...

...because that's how fucked I am about this bastard.

--PRESENT WHEREABOUTS OF THE WOMAN ***RESPONSIBLE*** FOR THE DEATH OF YOUR ***FRIEND***-- GENOCIDE JONES.

SHUT UP, OLD MAN...

YOU SHOULD ***TALK*** TO THE WOMAN BEFORE YOU KILL HER, HOLDEN. FIND OUT WHAT SHE ***KNOWS***...

And I wonder, is this how ALL of Lynch's targets felt while he was manipulating them?

Before he twisted the knife?

Because clearly, he's maneuvering me here.

The question is, what will HE get out of this? Does HE want M'Batu dead? Or does he just want me to THINK that so I WON'T kill her out of rebellion against him?

Maybe she's worth more to Lynch alive...

Second-guessing men like Lynch and Tao was enough to drive you crazy.

And what the hell PRIZE does he think he's dangling in front of me?

I'VE GOT THE ONE THING YOU WANT *MOST*...

HOW WOULD YOU EVEN *KNOW* WHAT I WANT ANYMORE?

Since what he took away from me are things I can never get back.

Like my life... After all the things I've done, and all the lies he told about me that are even WORSE, I could never be an I.O. agent again.

...and even if she could, the fact is, I'm not the same man she used to love.

And Veronica...no matter what she said last week, it could never work between us again.

She could never get over the fact that Lynch and I lied to her, ruined her life for a mission...

Now I'm the man Miss Misery loves, in her twisted way.

How strange that the last shred of SYMPATHY I have for anyone in this world is for a woman who is physically incapable of feeling any herself.

If only I could have known the day my team landed in the jungle what a sick joke my life would turn into because of that mission...

Before my men died trying to save me.

Before I woke up to Lynch's smiling face, telling me how we could turn this situation to our advantage.

Before that fucking alien artifact melded with my nervous system and made me the monster I am

You never realize how beautiful pain is until it's gone. Until you have to COMBINE pleasure and pain to get even the slightest tingle

SO WHAT COULD YOU ***POSSIBLY*** GIVE ME, LYNCH, THAT I WOULD EVEN ***WANT*** ANYMORE?

I bounce that question around in my head for days...

<I CAN SICK EVERY FUCK-PIG SHIT COCK-SUCKER IN THIS SPATULA RADIO!>

...but it's only tonight, earlier, that the ANSWER hits me.

<THAT'S RIGHT, HORSE BREATHERS! I SHIT YOUR BRANCH!>

And it's SO obvious I almost start laughing.

But that would be rude, because I'm in the middle of a bar-fight.

I wasn't lying to Tao about one thing--my Arabic IS rusty, but not so rusty I can't start trouble when I need to.

And tonight I need to. My pain storage is at nil, and I'm going to need some for this job.

So letting a dozen Egyptians beat the shit out of the idiot American seems like the best way to go.

I COULD sit in my hotel room and shoot myself in the palm with a staple-gun over and over again, I suppose.

But this just feels right.

<POLICE! EVERYONE STOP!>
<WHAT IS GOING ON?>
<IT WAS NOT US, OFFICER. IT WAS THE WHITE DEVIL WHO STARTED IT!>
<WHAT WHITE DEVIL?>
Easy to slip away when your body works just as well when it's broken.
And now I had just enough pain inside to make sure my punches would feel like sledgehammers for the rest of the night.
BAR

So, an hour after checking in with Tao, I make my move...

RUAALLPPHHG!

UH...SIR, ARE YOU...ARE YOU *UNWELL?*

ARE YOU A GUEST OF THE--

AHHH!

The Service Elevator has no security camera feed at this entrance...

...and I can just stand UNDER the one inside, so I won't be seen.

So I'm left to my own devices on getting to Diamanda M'Batu's penthouse suite.

Of course, the REASON for this lack of security is that this elevator doesn't reach the top ten floors.

HE--

BLEEP

Lynch's message haunts me again, at the moment of truth.

He wants me to talk to her instead of just killing her.

That should be reason enough to put one between her eyes while she sleeps.

But of course, since it's been eating at me for a week and a half, I have to find out what the hell she's got to say.

DON'T SCREAM OR MOVE OR DO ***ONE FUCKING THING,*** QUEEN BITCH...OR I'LL BLOW YOUR ***ROYAL*** BRAINS TO KINGDOM FUCKING COME.

MMMFFTTT

YOU UNDERSTAND ME?

YES... YES.

DO YOU KNOW WHY I'M ***HERE?***

I CAN HAZARD A GUESS.

YOU *SET US UP.*

YOU WANTED *REVENGE* ON TAO FOR YOUR LITTLE SECRET MONARCHY *FALLING APART,* SO YOU THOUGHT YOU'D TAKE OUT HIS TOP PEOPLE.

IS *THAT* WHAT YOU BELIEVE?

IT'S WHAT I *KNOW.*

I WAS *THERE,* REMEMBER?

I SAW HOW *DISAPPOINTED* YOU WERE THAT HE WASN'T SENDING *ALL* HIS PRODIGALS.

I AM AT YOUR *MERCY,* OBVIOUSLY, MISTER CARVER...

...SO I WILL TELL YOU *THREE* THINGS, AND THEN YOU MAY DECIDE WHETHER YOU WANT TO KILL ME OR NOT.

FIRST AND FOREMOST, IF I MEANT TO KILL YOU AND THE OTHER PRODIGALS, AS YOU CALL THEM, YOU WOULD ***ALL*** BE ***DEAD*** NOW.

YOU ***WOULDN'T*** BE WAVING A PISTOL AT ME IN MY OWN ROOMS.

SECONDLY, THE MISSION I CONTRACTED TAO FOR WAS ***GENUINE.***

IT WAS COMPLETED BY YOUR ASSOCIATE ***PETER GRIMM*** THE DAY BEFORE YOUR CAPTURE.

AND FINALLY, ***WHY*** WOULD I WANT VENGEANCE ON TAO FOR KILLING MY ***ENEMIES,*** SINCE IT WAS I WHO ASKED HIM TO DO IT?

YOU ASKED HIM TO--?

I DIDN'T EXPECT THE ***CHAOS*** AND ***TURMOIL*** THAT FOLLOWED, OF COURSE, BUT WHEN DEALING WITH TAO, ONE MUST ***ALWAYS*** EXPECT A ***CERTAIN*** AMOUNT OF CHAOS.

BUT MY SHOW OF ANGER WAS JUST ***THAT,*** MISTER CARVER...A ***SHOW.***

NOW, IT IS TIME TO SEE ***YOUR*** TRUE FACE, I SUPPOSE, ISN'T IT?

The funny thing was, I had ORIGINALLY thought that Tao set me up.

I wasn't even sure I was really being held by I.O. until Marc Slayton came to probe my brain.

But that meeting with Diamanda M'Batu before the mission, how she'd been so irritated that she wasn't getting all three Prodigals...

...that had ALWAYS stuck with me.

If Tao DID know I was undercover, as he claims, then letting me fall into the hands of my own people was a brilliant cruel joke on his part.

Since none of them KNEW which side I was really on back then.

AXXON

But to sacrifice Genocide and, potentially, Miss Misery, too, just to fuck with my head...

I guess I SHOULDN'T be surprised, but I am.

The thing is, Gretchen--Miss Misery--has never quite been the same since our capture.

I don't know whether it was what THEY did to her, or what SHE did to herself...when she broke down and tried to save my skin.

And now when I see her, I KNOW it's my fault, more than ever...

Genocide...THAT'S my fault, too.

Because Tao had plans for me, and using the only two people left that I cared about was just a means to his end.

I wouldn't be mad at him if it had just been me.

But I guess Lynch knew that, didn't he?

HOLD ON, I JUST HAVE TO MAKE A QUICK PHONE CALL.

COME **ON**, HOLDEN. WE WERE SUPPOSED TO MEET RAY AND WOLF AT ALTER EGO TWENTY MINUTES AGO.

JUST WAIT **THERE**, YOU TWO...THIS IS BUSINESS.

WHAT BUSINESS'S HE **DOING?** IT'S THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT.

OH, HOLDEN **ALWAYS** HAS HIS SECRETS, PIT BULL... YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT BY NOW.

IT'S ONE OF MY FAVORITE THINGS ABOUT HIM.

I LOVE THE WAY THEY JUST TEAR HIM UP INSIDE.

AT THE TONE, PLEASE STATE YOUR NAME AND CALL SIGN...

BEEP

HOLDEN CARVER, NO CALL SIGN.

VOICE ANALYSIS ACTIVATED...PLEASE WAIT...BRRRK... CLIK...BRRRK...

PLEASE HANG UP PHONE AND WAIT TEN SECONDS.

BRRRNNG

BRRRNNG BRRRNNG

BRRRNNG

YOU THERE, OLD MAN?

I AM, HOLDEN, BUT I'M DISAPPOINTED.

WHY'S THAT?

YOU KILLED MS. M'BATU EVEN *AFTER* HEARING HER STORY.

HOW DO YOU KNOW I HEARD *ANYTHING?*

BECAUSE I KNOW YOU, AGENT CARVER.

YEAH, WELL, WHAT DID YOU EXPECT?

I COULDN'T JUST LET HER RUN AND TELL TAO ABOUT MY LITTLE MIDNIGHT MEETING WITH HER...

AND SHE STILL PLAYED A HAND IN ALL OF IT, DIDN'T SHE? IT'S NOT LIKE SHE WAS INNOCENT.

NO, I DON'T BELIEVE *ANY OF US* HAS EVER BEEN ACCUSED OF BEING *INNOCENT.*

SO, ARE YOU GOING TO MEET WITH ME, THEN?

THAT DEPENDS. THIS *THING* YOU'RE OFFERING, THE ONE THING I SUPPOSEDLY *WANT...*

...IS IT WHAT I THINK IT IS?

Brubaker*Phillips*Strachan*Fletcher*Quinn*Dunbier